

**NGLS  
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DOSSIER**

**THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF CAPACITY**

*by Allan Kaplan*

**NGLS  
1999**

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UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service



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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAPACITY

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*by Allan Kaplan*

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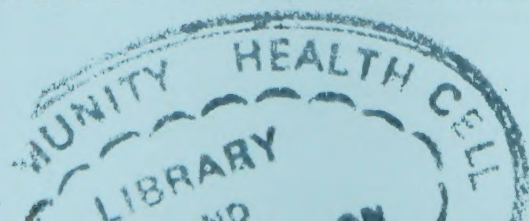
Allan Kaplan is the Executive Director of the Community Development Resource Association based in Woodstock, South Africa.

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This is the tenth in the series of NGLS *Occasional Papers*, renamed *Development Dossiers*. They are published for development educators and development action NGOs who are welcome to use them in their own publications. Please credit source and send NGLS a copy.

UNCTAD/NGLS/127

Published in February 1999 by  
UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS)  
Palais des Nations, CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland  
Room FF-346, United Nations, New York NY 10017, United States



DEV-100  
07427 1999



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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The two pieces which comprise this *Development Dossier* emerge out of the collective reflections-on-experience of the consultants of the Community Development Resource Association, a South African-based NGO consultancy practice which has been in existence for some thirteen years. During this time we have consulted to—and provided training for—development organisations and practitioners throughout Southern and East Africa and Eastern Europe, as well as donor organisations and programme officers in the North. This has provided us with an overview of, and a singular perspective on, development practice and capacity-building interventions. As a result of some of the publications which we have already produced on these and related topics, I was invited to present our particular perspective on development and capacity building for this *Development Dossier*.

I have written these pieces, as a practitioner and out of the experience of practice, with a sense of urgency. It is becoming more and more difficult for us as development practitioners to justify, to ourselves, our allegiance to the practice of development when the development sector has largely become a farce, at best, and yet another instrument of hegemony, at worst.

Our own practice becomes limited when the organisations we consult to, development organisations, are unbearably constrained by having to work within the milieu of a development sector which is unthinking, and which has dominant allegiances with those very forces which conspire to maintain the status quo. Yet there are many development practitioners, organisations and donors who are genuinely trying to develop alternative practices. This *Development Dossier* is written with the specific intent of improving the practice of development and capacity building.



It comprises two pieces. The first has been adapted from our 1998 *Annual Report*; the second is an adaptation of a chapter from a forthcoming book on Organisation Development. Together these two pieces now form one argument and perspective with respect to new ways of looking at development and capacity-building practice. Given that capacity building has become an important and ubiquitous concept within the development sector, yet with little coherent or collective appreciation—either for the theory or the practice—this publication is timely and challenging and will, hopefully, inspire new ways of apprehending and practising development.

The arguments presented here are radical alternatives to conventional development and capacity-building practice. As such, they will inevitably be treated with a certain degree of scepticism, given our fear of the unknown, our resistance to change, and the moribund sense of the impossibility of adapting and modifying a vast and complicated system which has been dedicated to pursuing a particular approach. The daunting challenge of turning both the approach and the system—organisational, procedural, methodological—on their heads. Challenges indeed. Not to be underestimated, nor disrespected. It is inevitable that the perspectives presented here will be resisted simply because the challenge of change is so daunting. Easier to stay with the known, with the conventional, than to be the individual to rock the seemingly intransigent boat. Yet if the challenge is rejected on these grounds—and there are no other grounds on which to base a rejection of at least the possibility of the validity of these arguments—then there is little option for anything other than an increasing cynicism with respect to the development endeavour, and the building of capacity in particular. We know already that the development sector is having great difficulty in achieving its supposed goals; it is difficult to escape this conclusion when looking at the achievements to date. Cynicism, manifested as an increasing tiredness and a dependence on confirmations generated by adherence to, and “successful” applications of, current organisational realities rather than on developmental impact itself, is already rampant within the development sector. If we



## *Author's Preface*

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are honest with ourselves, we cannot deny this creeping paralysis. Alternatives, even if only experimental at this stage, are called for.

Such alternatives are radical. No doubt, and in the literal sense of the word. It will require enormous effort of will for individuals to begin to challenge the conventional, and to experiment with new forms of practice and organisation. And there can be no doubt that change will depend on individual initiative—the system will not change all at once, and it will not change unless individuals begin to make that change happen. Thus, rather than presenting specific guidelines here as to how organisational and bureaucratic reality will have to adapt in order to encompass and support such change, I would like to invite those who engage with this publication to think through the questions which it raises for them, and to begin to discuss such questions amongst colleagues, within their own organisations, and with myself. Such questions may relate to theory, practice, methodology, organisational reality and procedure, and evaluative or strategic concerns. (It would be helpful if they were based on genuine attempts to think through one's own practical response to thoughts of implementing such an alternative perspective.) In this way, a dialogue may begin which could help us all to move forward. We would all, then, be practising development ourselves, rather than simply reading about it, or doing it to others.

Allan Kaplan  
January 1999

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## INTRODUCTION

In its series of *Development Dossiers* NGLS seeks to contribute to the on-going dialogue of the international development community, including governments, NGOs and the UN system, through the dissemination of challenging analyses and reflections from independent observers and authors on key current issues on the international development agenda. Past issues in the series have dealt, in a constructively critical way, with the “Washington consensus” on “Markets and Good Government”, with the issue of how development is communicated in the donor countries, and with the question of the role of the UN system and NGOs in global governance.<sup>1</sup>

The text for this *Development Dossier*, “The Development of Capacity”, was contributed by Allan Kaplan, the Executive Director of the Community Development Resource Association based in Woodstock, South Africa. CDRA is dedicated to strengthening organizational capacity and through consultancy and other forms, Kaplan has worked with a broad range of community-based organisations and NGOs in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa, and with European development NGOs.

In the pages that follow Kaplan presents a critique of current development practice and a vision of development and capacity-building “as it should be”. Drawing upon his practical experience in the field of organizational development, and on insights provided by the “new sciences”, the text challenges development practitioners, whether they be NGOs, the multilateral system or bilateral donors, to deeply rethink their development practice and to consciously build a shared, new paradigm which opens up opportunities for new

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1. “Markets and Good Government: The Way Forward for Economic and Social Development?” by Robert Archer (NGLS, 1994); “Is Anyone Listening? Communicating Development in Donor Countries” by Anne Winter (NGLS, 1995); “The United Nations, NGOs and Global Governance: Challenges for the 21st Century” (NGLS, 1996); “NGLS’s 20th Anniversary Conference” (NGLS, 1996).



forms of development relationships and, in particular, approaches to building organizational capacity.

It is an enormous challenge to the existing system of aid and international cooperation, Kaplan argues, because it means moving beyond the “development project” and the values, relationships, activities and mentalities enshrined in this, the current paradigm, and developing new approaches based upon different values, understandings and relationships between development practitioners—the latter being, in Kaplan terms, those who wish to facilitate, support or contribute to development, not “bring” it as third parties.

Kaplan’s observations and insights go the very heart of current debates on capacity building and aid effectiveness, and provide much food for thought—and action.

Tony Hill  
Coordinator, NGLS  
January 1999

### *Postscript*

As regular readers of NGLS’s publications may be aware, a number of Southern and Northern NGOs, bilateral and multilateral donors and foundations have recently established the International Forum on Capacity Building for Southern NGOs (IFCB). Launched in May of 1998, the purpose of the initiative is to build a multistakeholder forum to engage in debate and innovation which shape conceptual approaches, policies and practices for future capacity-building interventions. The IFCB has established an International Steering Committee and a Work Plan for the next two years. For more information contact the IFCB secretariat at:



## *Introduction*

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“I remembered one morning when I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as the butterfly was making a hole in its case and preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath. In vain. It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear, all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.”

—Nikos Kazantzakis  
*Zorba the Greek*



## CROSSROADS: A DEVELOPMENT READING

### Thesis

“Development, as in Third World Development, is a debauched word, a whore of a word. Its users can’t look you in the eye.”

—Leonard Frank

*We have met with them all, up and down the line, and we know that their story, in spite of its collaborative cohesion, is literally unreal; but there is no gap through which we may penetrate the madness. They all appear utterly convinced, their statements reverberating off each other as if we are all caught in a gigantic echo-chamber. Together, they represent the whole chain—from the local NGO responsible for the project, to the expatriate technical advisors and the national government’s departmental officials and extension officers, through to the foreign donors and their own governmental backers. For all of them this project is almost a talisman, a repository of meaning and purpose, a self-evident truth. Their easy belief causes us to doubt our own questions, their purpose and their efficacy. But we have been there, and we cannot doubt what we have seen. Or not seen.*

*Not that we can claim to have really spoken with the people, with the community for whom the project has supposedly been created; we do not speak their language, and our conversations have been frustrated and sullied through broken English and mediocre translation. Also, we come from such different worlds—we from a South African city, they from deep in the African bush. But we do have a limited ability to cross those borders; it is our work, after all, and we take it seriously. So we can at least identify their bemused confusion, their lack of interest, at this strange “development” project in the bush, even though it is tempered by generosity of spirit towards those who*



## *The Development of Capacity*

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*have come to "help them", and by the inevitable glimmerings of avaricious desire at the prospect of the resources which may offset their very real struggle for survival.*

*We have just completed an evaluation of a rural development NGO, and have submitted our report. The impact of the report hinged on the exposure of the flagship project of the NGO—a cooperative farming venture situated some kilometres from a tribal village which traditionally practised subsistence agriculture from individual homesteads. The evaluation report was, we thought, an attempt to report as honestly as possible. It had not been appreciated. We sat now with a sullen and angry group, representatives of the NGO, of the donors, of government. All were equally distressed. All were at pains to have us retract, or at least amend, our report.*

*We cannot allow this report to be circulated in Europe, rumbled the donors, we have raised millions on the basis of this project. And we, murmured the NGO, have been doing the best we can; you indicate now that we do not know what we are doing. And the government representatives bleated as if they were lambs being taken to the slaughter—would you destroy our attempts to modernise our people and our economy, they demanded?*

*Look, we replied, an evaluation is not a judgement, it's a tool with which to learn. There is much that can be done, but not the way you're going about it. Assist the people to increase the yields from their homestead gardens, and build slowly from there. But what you have done strikes us as somewhat absurd. The thing is, none of the villagers asked you to do what you have done. They wanted help simply with increasing their yield. But this was not enough for you. So now, deep in the bush, unconnected by road to any source of supply or marketing outlet, one and a half hours walk from the nearest village, a 30 hectare plot of cleared ground stands fenced and empty. You have put down two bore holes, and this together with the fencing and some unused machinery lying about has cost you 50,000 dollars.*



*You have provided the "cooperative" with two weeks training. When we visited the project, at 11:00 in the morning, no one was working on the plot; actually, no one was there at all. The two cooperative members who accompanied us—one of whom is the chairperson—appeared to understand nothing about cooperatives, economic agriculture, or the project as an entity. No one is taking responsibility for, or displaying any commitment towards, "their" cooperative. One of the members stated that unless some form of salary was forthcoming soon, from the NGO, he would leave. Apart from calling in question the very concept of cooperative, this clearly, at best, is a long-term venture which will only realise "profit" some years down the line. He wants a job; other villages simply want to continue farming as they have in the past, although better. There is, we put to the circle of staring faces, simply nothing there to speak of, apart from the ruins of your own activities.*

*But don't you see, they responded, we need a project of this kind to change a way of life which is going nowhere.*

*We sat back and looked at them. Yes, we were thinking, clearly this is their need, but what does it have to do with the reality of the community? At the same time, we realised that we were falling into the same trap which had snared them. They were our clients, and they had not asked for an opportunity to learn. They had asked for an evaluation report which they could use to raise further funds. We could not alter the report, but we saw that it had indeed become simply a judgement, not a developmental tool. The circle had not been broken; it had simply wound in upon itself, and become stuck in its own grooves.*

*For many, many years now, for longer than many of us have been around, the concept of development has been with us. At least, development as it is generally understood: as a political-economic project which is intended to assist "under-developed" communities and countries to "become developed", in the sense of "catching-up"*



with “developed” countries. Development has thus been understood largely from an economic perspective—as the eradication, or at least the reduction, of poverty (and therefore, concomitantly, development has implied the building of—or entry into—a modern economy). More recently it has also gained a political overtone—“developed” is often synonymous with democracy, pluralism, justice, equity and respect for a universal code of human rights. (Moreover, it also often promotes a normative stance—for instance, the promotion of gender awareness as an intervention into “traditional” culture.) When coupled with each other, the political economy perspective attains a social dimension: in some form or other development has implied modernisation—the transformation of “traditional” society (characterised by dependence on particular social forms and cultures, as well as on the whims and dictates of nature) towards “modern” society (characterised by control over nature, by individual free choice, and by independence as freedom from given social and natural reality).

This is a radically simplistic rendition of a highly complex concept, particularly today, when much that has passed for development lore has become contested and contentious. We are living in what is often described as a post-modern era, in which ambiguity, uncertainty and contradiction have replaced former certainties. Many feel that the development project has failed; the gap between rich and poor has increased rather than decreased, and ecological and social problems begin to render our world, in a very real sense, unsustainable. Development theory has undergone many transformations over the years, and today there is a growing body of thought which is beginning to question not simply the various theories but the very validity of the development concept itself. And further, not simply the concept, but the integrity and intentions of those who presume to practise and promote development.

Questions abound, but the mainstream of development practice, polluted though it may be, continues on its inexorable path to the sea.



There is little change. For underlying the various theories of development which inform practice, there are certain paradigmatic assumptions which are largely unconscious, and to that extent hold practitioners captive. We will attempt here to describe these assumptions and practices. Readers may resist recognising the operation of some or all of these assumptions in their practice, and they may in part be right—yet all of us have had our sensibilities marked by these assumptions. They may not describe what we all think—development theory no longer conforms to this simplistic modernist paradigm—but despite the new perspectives which are becoming available, what follows does to a large extent describe what we all do. Thereafter we will contrast these with another possible set of assumptions, which may take us some way towards the transformation of practice.

The dominant development paradigm is then, by and large, made up of the following assumptions and practices:

- Development can be created and engineered. Indeed, it must be. It does not exist in and of itself. Interventions, projects, are designed specifically to “bring” development to those amongst whom it is lacking.
- Development, then, is something which is brought, to and for some, by others who presumably are more developed.
- Development is done on behalf of third parties. In other words, the development practitioner brings development interventions which are designed and financed by third parties, not by the communities and clients who are the “subjects” of the intervention.
- All of the above constrains the development practitioner to work primarily out of the specifications of the world from which he/she has been sent, rather than out of an accurate and sensitive reading of the particular situation with which he/she is actually faced.
- Development is linear and predictable. Put another way, there is a direct line between cause and effect, between input and output.



So long as we have made the correct assumptions initially we should be able to predict output based on input.

- This gives rise to the concept of the “development project” which is generally short-term, time-bound, limited in terms of resources and both limited and finite (predictable) in terms of output. The development project, which is the primary vehicle for development intervention and finance, presumes these assumptions to be true. Development can be said, in fact, to be defined and framed by the concept of the development project—development begins and ends where the particular project begins and ends. Development itself, then, has a beginning and an end; and the assumption is that the end can be defined and provided for at the beginning. (It is also remarkably difficult, in terms of donor demand, to change a project substantially once it has started, in response to what has been learned about strategy and methodology during the early implementation of the project. Despite the rhetoric, real learning is not high on the agenda.)
- Development presumes a particular perspective on human nature—that understanding will generate change. (Hence the emphasis on training and technical assistance in development interventions.) It does not take much account of unconscious factors, of processes of change, of culture, tradition, or the human heart.
- Concomitantly, development places far more emphasis on technical experts and “advisors”, and on trainers, than it does on change facilitators. This emphasis expresses itself in terms of project specifications, in terms of relative positioning within NGOs and in terms of remuneration.
- Development assumes a preferred culture or value system. This presumption is denied by most development pundits, yet it remains true. The presumption is that there is something wrong, and we intervene to change it. We judge the results according to our own norms.
- As an ironic addendum to the two preceding points, development practitioners are not required to pay attention to their own



development as human beings, as part of effective development practice. The development practitioner's own development and processes of learning are entirely removed from the picture. There is thus little or no reciprocity in the relationship between developer and "developee".

- Development has come to accept that the "subject's" participation in the development project is vital, but it sees that participation as a means, not as an end in itself.
- Development assumes that a successful development intervention, or project, is replicable; indeed, this is one criterion in judging its success. If it is not replicable elsewhere, it is lacking in value.
- Likewise, the successful development project is sustainable, both in terms of financial resourcing as well as in terms of continuity of the effects achieved. If the effects of the intervention are not sustained, the project will be deemed to have been unsuccessful.
- The evaluation of development interventions—which tells us much about the underlying assumptions—is generally performed in terms of the ends stipulated in the project document, not in terms of the myriad other outcomes which may (or may not) have been forthcoming in terms of the individuals, communities or organisations with whom the development intervention had been entered into.

Generally, the underlying paradigm which characterises a "conventional" development approach is fundamentally about the **delivery of resources**. These resources come in various guises—they may be finances, equipment, technical know-how, skills, political clout, even a particular approach to life. The point is, those who are under-developed lack certain resources; development (at its best) entails the effort to transfer those resources from those who have to those who do not have.



### Antithesis

“Each person is a new marvel, a new mystery, a fully justified fact....We stand before each other in awe and wonder.”

—B. C. J. Lievegoed

*She spoke with animation, with an energy which might have been intoxicating were it not so rigorously grounded. A kind of rational passion infused her speech. She was the director of an NGO which had recently worked through an organisation development process with a consultant; she was being questioned as to the value of the intervention.*

*“Look, I have just come back from a meeting with department officials, and for the first time I was able to hold my own with them, to resist intimidation, to resist their pressure, to stand my ground and to win significant concessions. You have to understand—they are all men, a whole roomful of them in their grey suits and dreary ties, smug in the righteousness of their bureaucratic power, disdainful of women, of NGOs, of the issues I was bringing. I never find it easy, facing that kind of situation alone, a stranger in a strange land. But today was different, I feel different, I am different, and I attribute a lot of that to the organisational intervention.*

*“So how did this actually happen?” She was anticipating our questions, and we decided to simply sit back and listen. “Firstly,” she said, “you have to understand that the consultant who has been facilitating our own capacity-building has been working with us for many years. She doesn’t fulfil donor specifications—we’re her client, and the understanding and contract lies between us, not with the donor. It is up to us to raise the money to pay her, so together we have some control over our relationship. This gives her a certain freedom, to work with the issues which arise as important when they arise, and not to have to fulfil the expectations of others. Apart from this, she’s worked with us for some years now; she knows the*



*organisation, she knows the developmental steps we have taken, she can read where we are now and can begin to anticipate where our next steps, our next leaps, perhaps, might lie. That's the right word, "read", its what she does in order to help us move further, but she always somehow reads aloud, in other words we're fully aware of her thinking as we go, and she of ours.*

*"This time we had requested a conventional strategic planning session, an annual event for us. Now we're an organisation that has spent years developing and articulating our identity, our vision, our overall strategy and methodology. Yet during the first morning it became apparent that our main questions concerning the organisation centred on our inability to get in touch with these things, as a prelude to specific planning. We claimed not to know what they really were, what our essence was.*

*"Because she knew us, she could not believe that this was the real issue. She took us through a series of processes which proved that we were very aware of the essential nature of our contribution. She then ventured the opinion that it was not our lack of awareness that was the problem but rather our insecurity, our lack of acknowledgement of ourselves and our contribution—that is, the fact that we were unable to get in touch with our essence was the issue, not the lack of an essence itself.*

*"So she took us through a series of exercises which enabled us to become conscious of that which was unconsciously holding us back. In the process, we got in touch with our shadow. It seems to work like this, that the very things we pride ourselves on, consciously, release opposite energies which we are not conscious of and which thereby achieve immense ability to constrain our efforts. In our case, we pride ourselves on being an open and flexible organisation, almost without boundaries, an organisation which listens and responds, rather than presumes and imposes, an organisation which attempts to work developmentally with whatever it finds, rather than*



*from a set of its own prescriptions. A nurturing, facilitative organisation. In other words, an organisation which tries to build the power of others, rather than its own. This is our light. But the shadow which emerges and which seeks to gain dominance is then our own powerlessness, our inability to say no to the impossible number of requests that we get, our inability to hold our own in the face of the rigid certainties and expectations imposed upon us by those with whom we collaborate, by those whom we lobby and advocate towards. We become overwhelmed. And because so many others gain their power through rigidity and dogmatism, through seeking to impose their will on others, we lose a sense of our own power, of the value and importance of our essential responsiveness, of that which we bring. So we begin to feel insecure and shaky.*

*“All this was painful to acknowledge, but it proved to be an unbelievably developmental step for us. Each of us individually, and the organisation as a whole, was able to make conscious our own contributions to this dilemma, and through this we were able to realise our own power. Not to change our essence in order to match the power of others, but to gain confidence and clarity about our essential contribution, and to work proactively out of that new sense of power. We were enabled to feel sure of ourselves; we were enabled to regain what we previously had, but which we had lost along the way, as our very success had taken us into new realms of work and relationship.*

*“Having come so far, the rest of the strategic planning session followed its more usual course. But the value of the process lay in those initial stages, in the consultant’s ability to read correctly the developmental stage that we were at, and to bring the processes which enabled us to transform, to move beyond. We were privileged to have a consultant who did not feel bound by any restrictions other than the needs of the development process itself, who felt free to venture in unusual directions. And for us, we have all grown immeasurably, and the organisation feels totally transformed, able*



*once more to bring its light with clarity and purpose. More than this, we are able now to see the shadows which the light casts, we are able to catch ourselves when we lapse into powerlessness. We have become more aware of our own patterns, and are now able to exercise control, to take responsibility for our own future.”*

At the core of the CDRA's understanding of the concept of development is the recognition that development is an innate and natural process found in all living things. It is important for us to understand that as development workers we do not “bring” or deliver development, but intervene into development processes which already exist. Whether the intervention is into the life of an individual, organisation or community it is critical to realise that the process of development is already well established and needs to be treated with respect. The most fundamental challenge facing the development practitioner is to understand the development process into which she or he is intervening. To know where the individual, the organisation or the community is located on its own path of development. To understand where it has come from, how it has changed along the way and what the next development challenge is likely to be. And, to be able to “read” in this way, an openness is required, an ability to observe acutely and without preconception, but with a fine understanding of development processes, so that insight can be brought to observation. In short, a certain detachment is required, without pretending to supposedly scientific objectivity.

Equipped with this knowledge and understanding the practitioner can begin to assess how the resources that they bring will impact on the development process. Some of the most common examples of the consequences of the inappropriate introduction of resources are the increase of dysfunctional dependency on the provider of the resource, and the inappropriate use or abuse of the resources to the detriment of the recipient. Equally it is at times almost miraculous to experience the difference that an appropriate development intervention facilitated in a sensitive and responsive way can make to the genuine empowerment of the recipient. And this, surely, is the essence of a development



intervention—the facilitation of growing awareness and consciousness such that people are able to take control of their own lives and circumstances, and exert responsibility and purpose with respect to their future. This inevitably implies also an activist stance; that is, assistance with confronting the manifestations and dynamics of power, however these may manifest. If a development intervention does not succeed in this, then it can hardly be said to have been developmental.

To locate the recipient of one's services on their own path of development, and understand the implications of the point it has reached, is obviously not a simple process of quantitative measurement. It demands a clear understanding of the development process itself, coupled with respect for the specific instance of such a process which one is actually facing. We cannot go into the details of such a framework for understanding in this text, but we will raise one or two aspects of our understanding, of our framework, in order to provide at least a sense of what we mean.

Thus, one aspect of our understanding of the process of development identifies three discernible phases of *ideal unimpeded* development which we apply to understand humans as well as the social systems they create. The first phase characterised by **dependence** is a period of great learning and skills acquisition in which others play a major role in providing the environment and resources required for growth. The second phase of **independence** entails a fundamental change in relationship and a period of testing and personalising capacities and competencies, using them to act and impact on the environment in ways that help establish the actor as unique and self-reliant. The third phase involves another fundamental change in relationships towards increasing **inter-dependence**—the actor now understands that the full realisation of one's own potential is achieved only through effective collaboration with others.

Many examples can be found to illustrate the application of this framework of understanding in trying to better apprehend



development in different situations. In the human individual the three phases would correspond with childhood, adolescence through early adulthood, and mature adulthood. The “pioneer”, “differentiated” and “integrated” phases of development often referred to in organisation development theory can also be better understood when the phases are explored from the perspective of dependence, independence and interdependence. Even when looking at the fundamental relationship between humankind and nature (or the environment) over the ages the application of the framework adds insight. From dependence on nature, to the rational scientific phase characterised by attempts to gain control over nature and become independent of it, leading to the conscious rediscovery of environmental sustainability possibly heralding a developmental shift from independence towards interdependence.

It is critical that these phases are all recognised as developmental and one is not judged as being superior to any other. The full and positive experience of each phase provides learning and capabilities which are vital to the ability to engage in the next phase. Each phase is essential to the next and each subsequent phase carries within it the experiences of the phases which preceded it—it is not possible to skip phases. It is also necessary to recognise that these phases are continually recurring and overlapping in the course of the life of an individual, organisation or community—as one develops one encounters new areas in which these sequenced phases must be experienced afresh. Although skilled and sensitive interventions can help avoid and even remove hindrances and blockages to the process, development does have a pace of its own. There is an absolute limit to the extent to which it can be speeded up through the application of increased resources and developmental interventions.

Following on from the recursive nature of the development process, alluded to above, a further defining characteristic, one which sets development apart from quantitative growth, is its non-linear nature. Development does not constantly progress along a



smooth incremental line; at critical points in the process there are periods of significant crisis and turmoil, periods when everything that has previously provided stability and meaning are questioned and challenged, periods when conflict is often symptomatic. These developmental crises serve a critical function in providing the impetus for letting go of the old in order to take on the new (another critical feature of the development process). Often the crises need to be of such gravity that those involved know that there is no option other than to break the old forms in order to build the new. The seeds of crisis are sown in each phase of development and grow at their own pace as the process unfolds; the passing from one phase to another is prompted by their germination. To understand where an organisation has gotten to in its development, the development practitioner must read her or his client's needs deeply, and with respect—this goes way beyond the conventional practice of needs analysis, whether this be participatory or not.

There is a seeming contradiction in what has been written above. Development is non-linear, therefore unpredictable and even anarchic; at the same time, there appear to be natural phases, sequences and modalities which can be said to characterise the process as a particular pattern or arrangement. The contradiction is a real one, but rather than being the kind of contradiction which demands resolution, it can be seen as the beating heart of development itself, an irreducible tension which provides the energy to fuel the process. A constant interplay between order and chaos, between form and flow. Which is one of the primary characteristics—according to recent advances in thinking prompted by the “new sciences”—of all living systems.

It follows from all of this—which really provides just a taste of the dynamics of the development process, just the first hint of an appreciative framework for grasping it—it follows that development interventions are essentially about the development of people, and that development cannot be imposed. No actor will develop in a



particular way just because someone has argued eloquently that they ought to do so. Ultimately, development is driven from within, so while a development worker must bring specialist knowledge and skill to an intervention, the final outcome of the intervention is determined by the client. Moreover, development processes take time, significant periods of time; and their flow—in terms of both time and outcome—cannot be determined beforehand. An effective development practice **accompanies** clients through their developmental changes; once-off interventions and pre-designed packages are quite literally besides the point.

Finally, while all clients develop, none does so in quite the same way as any other. So developmental interventions are not “expert products or packages of resources” delivered as input to organisations. Rather, they are processes which are created and applied in response to particular situations. Whatever else they are, and whatever else they deliver, they are purposefully and specifically geared towards helping people gain an understanding of themselves such that, in time, they are better able to take control of their own future and to themselves arrive at effective solutions to questions, problems and concerns, including economic and political marginalisation. This is not to say that the development practitioner should not play an activist role—on the contrary, solidarity is vital, as is the creation of enabling environments in which people are freer to pursue their processes of development. It is only to say that development work itself must leave people in more control of their circumstances, whatever those may be, and not subservient to those circumstances, however advantageous these may be.

Ultimately, then, the development paradigm which we are articulating here has little to do with the transfer of resources, which we saw earlier as the notion which informed the traditional approach to development. On the contrary, development is about **facilitating** resourcefulness, and this is a vastly different take on a very tired subject. A perspective which demands a vastly different response



from practitioners. We would like to take the reader through the points raised in the previous section, in the same sequence, in order to demonstrate the difference between the conventional, and this alternative, paradigm.

- Development cannot be created or engineered. As a process, it exists independently of the development practitioner. All that we can do is facilitate processes which are already in motion. Where they are not in motion, it would be best—and honest—to refrain.
- Development is not something which is brought. Being driven from within, it is not the prerogative of an outsider. Respect for the integrity of others' processes must be paramount, not simply from a moral point of view but because of the reality of the development process. As development practitioners we can assist the flow of the process, but nothing more. It is not so much that we should not impose, but that we cannot—witness the history of the development endeavour to date.
- Real—and read here also “honest”—development work cannot be done to others on behalf of third parties. (Third parties being those with a vested interest—however benign—in the future of others whom they resource, influence or control.) Development interventions have to flow out of the development processes of those seeking to develop. If development interventions are designed by third parties, and not through the free interaction between development worker and client, then it must categorically be stated that the result is not development work; it becomes at best a patronising collusion, at worst a cynical manipulation. This has huge implications for current practice with respect to the financing of development. Instead of fearful control, space must be allowed for real and responsive development practice to take place.
- Similarly, intervention specifications which are “predetermined”, and which do not respond to accurate and sensitive readings of the particular situation with which a development practitioner is faced, will warp and destroy the development process. And also, because situations change continuously in



response to the development intervention (and other factors) responsiveness and flexibility and mobility are required from the development practitioner. And from the development organisation. This places large responsibility on the practitioner and organisation, and demands new capacities with respect to—at least—reflecting, learning and managing.

■ Development is not linear and predictable. Quite the contrary. We can never know quite what will flow out of a development intervention. There will always be outcomes which had never been planned, detours from paths which had been planned, unexpected reactions and contradictory achievements. An accurate reading of the actual—and largely intangible—developmental place where the client is at will help, but never entirely. “Output” is never based on input but on a complicated array of factors, including the precise relationship between “input” and the developmental process being intervened upon. Our assumptions will always be inadequate, although of course they must be made, for they form the foundation of any intervention; but always with due caution.

■ Development has no end; the effective development intervention opens things up, rather than closes them down. Equally, development does not begin when we decide to intervene; it had already begun. The concept of the development project, then, with its beginning and end, its externally generated specifications, its notion of predictability and its lack of adaptability and mobility, has little to do with the effective development intervention, let alone with development itself. Indeed, the concept of the development project is anathema to the concept of development. It is a figment of an engineering mindset, at best a managerial tool used by a form of management inimical to development work, at worst a donor requirement to fulfil inappropriate financial control systems. Given its place at the very heart of the development system, it demonstrates both the misguidedness at the core of that system as well as the system’s intractability. It is the repository of all that is wrong with conventional development practice,



and the greatest stumbling block to effective development interventions. (It is ironic that so much that goes by the name of “capacity building” today entails training NGO management in what is called “project management”.)

This is not to say that development practitioners and organisations should be given freedom (and licence?) to simply do whatever they want without frameworks to ensure accountability. It is not to say that *parameters* should not be set for development interventions. Such parameters would include objectives, time-frames, strategies and evaluation criteria. But it is important to regard these as *guidelines* for continuous monitoring, learning and adaptation—on the part of practitioner, client and donor—with respect to intervention processes. It is imperative that we recognise the development *process* as the issue, rather than successful implementation of a particular project. And it is critical to understand the project as a mere fragment of such process, rather than confuse it with the development process itself.

- It was George Bernard Shaw who stated that: “Reformers mistakenly believe that change can be achieved through brute sanity”. Processes of development are beset with unconscious factors, and realities of tradition, culture, motivation and resistances to change. We fool ourselves at our own peril, and we have been fooling ourselves for years.
- Quite simply, development practitioners skilled in facilitating processes of change are of far more value to the development endeavour than technical experts, advisors or trainers.
- Development always, somewhere, assumes a preferred culture or value system, or way of doing things. This is implied in the very notion of intervening in others’ processes. We can mitigate this, but we will never get rid of it entirely, even when we operate out of an alternative development paradigm. This takes us immediately to the next point.
- It is precisely because of our own unconscious projections and assumptions that we, as development practitioners, have to pay



attention to our own development. This is not a luxury, and it is not an addendum to other capacities; it is a central requirement of the discipline. At the very least, how can we possibly presume to intervene in others' development if we do not understand our own, or if we are not prepared to engage in our own? At the most, it will enable us to read the developmental processes of others without that reading being tainted by our own unconscious and unworked through norms, beliefs, values and psychological disabilities. Reciprocity.

- Participation is an end, not simply a means. The whole point of development is to enable people to participate in the governance of their own lives. If this is not seen then the entire development endeavour becomes a farce.
- The insistence that successful development projects be replicable—as a condition for that success—assumes that different situations are equal to each other. On the contrary, every situation is unique; every client is on their own development trajectory. Certainly we can learn principles and guidelines, develop insights, from both successful and unsuccessful development interventions, but the attempt to replicate is part folly and part disrespect for the specificity of people's processes of development.
- The issue of sustainability is a thorny one. In its current general usage as “financial sustainability”, the concept is inadequate, inappropriate and sometimes harmful as an assessment of a successful development programme; stability and stasis are foolish expectations. Sustainability, in terms of its applicability to development interventions, is more about achieving the ability to keep moving, changing, and improving one's “*response-ability*” to inevitably shifting circumstances, rather than assuming that those circumstances will ever be finally and successfully resolved, once and for all.
- The evaluation of development interventions must therefore take place against the background of the specific development process which has been intervened into, not against the ends



stipulated in a project document. This too has radical and far-reaching implications. There is often far more that might have been gained beyond the boundaries of original expectations, if we are only open to looking beyond these boundaries, and beyond the boundaries of our own input.

### **Synthesis**

“Learning has to move to the heart of practice.”

—David Sogge

The arguments raised above, as well as their meaning for a new form of development practice, demand further elaboration to respond to at least some of the questions which must arise. We attempt some response to some of these questions through looking at three inter-linked “movements”.

#### ***First Movement***

One of the questions which may arise has to do with evaluation, and poverty. What has been said thus far is all very well, but it says nothing of poverty, of the eradication—or at least alleviation—of poverty; and surely this, after all, is the whole thrust of the development endeavour. Development interventions are ultimately about reducing poverty, are they not? So it’s all very well making fine points about the development *process*, but how does this relate to people’s needs, and how can we claim that “the evaluation of development interventions must take place against the background of the specific development process which has been intervened into”, rather than in terms of whether it has made any material difference in people’s circumstances? What does it help that “people gain an understanding of themselves” if we have not been able to improve their material circumstances?

We could reply that, after decades of conventional development practice which has been governed by this economistic perspective,



the levels of poverty in our world—as economically defined—have increased rather than decreased.

We could also say—as indeed we have already—that helping people gain an understanding of themselves is done in order that “they are better able to take control of their own future and to themselves arrive at effective solutions to questions, problems and concerns, including economic and political marginalisation”.

We could say too that there are many ways to combat poverty, or achieve political change, but not all of them are particularly or specifically developmental. Whilst the political activist and economic reformer may play roles of incalculable value, and whilst development practitioners may also choose to play these roles as well as their own, nevertheless these are all different ways of dealing with poverty, and not all of them leave people in a better position to move with confidence into their own future. In other words, while the reduction of poverty may certainly feature prominently in judgments on development interventions, it cannot be the only measure, and indeed, it may at times be an inaccurate measure.

So we could use all these arguments, and in fact we do, but in a sense, despite their validity, they are slightly beside the point; at least beside one of the major points which emerges from this kind of discussion of development. And this is that the material, economic perspective on poverty is only one way of framing the subject, and a culturally specific one at that. Put another way, there are many forms of poverty, economic poverty being only one of these. And the question arises as to how much “other” poverty we create when our goal is narrowly defined as the alleviation of economic poverty. When all values are subsumed to the economic, as they increasingly are, particularly within a conventional development paradigm, how much do we lose with respect to social values, to artistic values, to cultural and language diversity, to biodiversity? We must surely recognise by



now that the world we are creating with our fixation on the economic is becoming immeasurably poorer with respect to everything which lives outside of the economic.

And the reason that the three arguments mentioned previously are slightly beside the point is because the general fixation on the economic creates another, much more insidious, type of poverty—lack of choice. Increasingly, people are being expected to toe the economic line, and freedom to choose “other”, to opt for culturally different priorities, is frowned upon as in some sense deviant. In this sense we are all being co-opted towards the creation of our own poverty, in the name of poverty alleviation!

Yet a real development practice, the efficacy of development interventions, must be judged on other grounds. People-centred development is about increasing, not decreasing, choice. If it is about enabling people to become more conscious, to understand themselves and their context such that they are better able to take control of their own future, if it “must leave people in more control of their circumstances, whatever those may be, and not subservient to those circumstances, however advantageous these may be”, then it cannot narrowly define itself as poverty alleviation in the conventional sense.

Therefore judgments on the efficacy of specific development interventions, while they must include the element of (conventionally defined) poverty alleviation, must also go beyond, and “take place against the background of the specific development *process* which has been intervened into”. The development endeavour is about poverty alleviation, yes, but in a much wider sense than is currently acknowledged. Development interventions, surely, should not result in a reduction of the world, but in an increase of possibilities.

### ***Second Movement***

Given all that has been said above, the question emerges as to how then one actually apprehends development, and the development



process. Earlier in the text we have, on a number of occasions, referred to the idea of “reading development”. We would like here to elaborate this concept.

Conventionally, we have learned not to intervene until we have done a needs assessment, or a needs analysis; until we have done an inventory, or an audit; until, through questionnaires or more participatory techniques we have ascertained the parameters of a situation. These methods, and the information they are intended to elicit, remain valid and relevant, but are not sufficient. “Reading development” implies something more.

CDRA’s experience in capacity-building, with respect to organisation, community and individual development, has yielded a certain perspective on capacity, which is our entry point into understanding this concept of “reading”. We will summarise briefly.

From our work with organisations—which is our starting point—we ascertained a number of elements which must be present and coherent for an organisation to be said to have capacity, or to be effective. These are—arranged sequentially in a hierarchy of importance—the following:

- A ***conceptual framework*** which reflects the organisation’s understanding of the world;
- An ***organisational “attitude”*** which incorporates the confidence to act in and on the world in a way that the organisation believes can be effective and have an impact, and an acceptance of responsibility for the social and physical conditions “out there”;
- Clear organisational ***vision and strategy***, and sense of purpose and will, which flows out of the understanding and responsibility mentioned previously;
- Defined and differentiated organisational ***structures and procedures*** which reflect and support vision and strategy;
- Relevant ***individual skills, abilities and competencies***;
- Sufficient and appropriate ***material resources***.



We have subsequently, both through our own work as well as in dialogue with other development practitioners working in many different areas, affirmed that this hierarchy of importance holds its validity, although with slightly different slants and angles, across community and individual capacity as well.

The aspect of this hierarchy which is relevant to our discussion here is this. That if you look towards the bottom of the hierarchy, you will see those things which are quantifiable, measurable, elements of capacity which can be easily grasped and worked with. They belong to the realm of material things, easily assessed and quantified; they belong to the realm of the visible. If however, we turn our attention to the top of the hierarchy, we enter immediately an entirely different realm, the realm of the invisible. The elements at the top of the hierarchy are ephemeral, transitory, not easily assessed or weighed. They are to a large extent intangible, observable only through the effects they have. It is these aspects which by and large determine capacity.

To this we must add two further points. First, that while every individual or grouping may share similar features, nevertheless each is unique, both in itself and in terms of its stage of development, and this uniqueness demands unique, singular and specifically different responses. And second, while the framework presented above may adequately describe the elements of capacity and even the order of their acquisition, it cannot predict or determine change processes, which are complex, ambiguous and often contradictory.

“Reading development”, then, apprehending the particular dynamics of an individual’s or grouping’s development trajectory or process, given that so much of it lies beneath the surface, veiled and continuously mutating, demands far more than the kinds of techniques we have become used to, for these are only designed to elicit the material, the tangible. In reality, one needs intelligence, acuity, mobility and penetrating perception to be able to read the particular nature of



a specific developmental process. The development practitioner needs genuine observation and listening skills, and the ability to combine an open and non-judgemental approach with enough understanding to make sense of, and draw insight out of, what one is observing. We need to take the time, and have the flexibility, to read specific situations in this way in order to design appropriate and necessarily transitory (necessarily because the individual or grouping being worked with will develop beyond a particular intervention as a result of the effectiveness of that intervention) interventions based on such intelligent reading. A reading of development must remain supple, subtle and nuanced; it must be iterative and gradual; it must be reflective and reflexive. We must penetrate, but softly, so that we can intuit underlying movements; and do so in such a way that the individual or grouping is itself enabled to come to such awareness and understanding.

Such capacities, such competencies, are new abilities which we as development practitioners need to develop—they are not skills in which we can be trained. The conventional development paradigm sees only skills in which practitioners can be trained—along the lines of engineers or technicians. The alternative development perspective demands a more developmental approach to building the capacity of its practitioners; it demands the original skills but adds abilities which may perhaps—by way of contrast—be described by analogy as artistic.

This ability to read is therefore not to be gained on training programmes, although these may provide a useful starting point. This set of abilities must be achieved gradually, through guided reflection on action, through facilitated self-critique, through mentoring and sharing with peers, through observing one's own development and through learning to make use of alternative modes of description in order to penetrate beyond—metaphors, similes, images and narrative. Developmental readings cannot be obtained within the cold and dry parameters of the conventional reporting format;



warmer and more human forms must be developed, to support the reading itself.

### ***Third Movement***

Given all the implications drawn out of an alternative perspective on development practice, the final area to which we must make reference concerns the management of such a practice. This will also lead us to address the question of the development project, which is a management tool which we have criticised as being “the repository of all that is wrong with conventional development practice, and the greatest stumbling block to effective development interventions”. If this is indeed the case, then what would we recommend to replace it?

We will not go into detail here with respect to alternative management methodologies and tools, as these must be created for specific organisational circumstances and needs. What we will concern ourselves with here are some indications as to the principles and attitudes which may guide our understanding of what constitutes good managerial practice for a new form of development.

If we are looking for a responsive development practice which is able to build appropriate and flexible interventions in accordance with nuanced and subtle readings, in a context fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty and continuous change, then a number of things follow. First, you have to develop effective development practitioners, practitioners who do not work out of books or project manuals, practitioners who do not “work primarily out of the specifications of the world from which they have been sent” but rather “out of an accurate and sensitive reading of the particular situation with which they are faced”. And this does not mean training them in new techniques, but fostering their development through guided reflection on action, facilitated self-critique, mentoring, peer reviews, and so on—all already mentioned above. (Already, you see, most management practices, judged simply by this first guideline, will be found wanting.)



Second, they must be allowed the space to be creative with respect to their styles of “reading”, their styles of reporting, their methods of facilitation (and yes, this applies to donor programme officers as well). Of course, this plays havoc with bureaucratic organisational styles, and requires a very fluid and responsive form of management. One which is simultaneously very “hands-on” and “hands-off”. Rigorously “present”, although with a very light touch. This is very different from the conventional. But how can we possibly expect a management style which is different from the form of development practice which it is attempting to manage?

Third, the supervision of these development practitioners, holding them accountable, must take a form which is different from the conventional “judgment by objectives” type of management. Of course, these criteria must be fulfilled; we have to know that the job is being done. But if the reading of development is what we have described it to be, if the evaluation of development interventions is as specific and nuanced as we have indicated, then supervision of the development practitioner is complex and intense. It requires, above all, that within the organisation as a whole, and between development practitioners, and between them and their managers, and between the managers themselves, a **continuous** conversation is kept alive, a striving to consciousness and awareness by the organisation and amongst its many parts. This kind of conversation can take many forms, some of which may be informal (which will be dependent on the fostering of the appropriate organisational culture), some of which may be formal and structured, following set procedures (presentations of case studies, group discussions around particular programmes, and so on); but such ongoing conversation constitutes the heart of appropriate management practice for development.

Fourth, and following from the above, management must be geared to ensure that the organisation is learning all the time, that it is open and flexible, guided by principle rather than by technique or methodology, by experience and practice rather than by academic



theory or ad hoc fashion, by its own understanding rather than by its “back donors”. Management has to ensure that organisational reflection and learning are not “add ons”, not something done in addition to the real work, but in fact constitute the real work itself.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, responsibility and authority must be decentralised, devolved to the outer limits of the organisation, to as great an extent as possible. Frequently development practitioners, or fieldworkers, are marginalised due to the fact that they work on the periphery of the organisation, while power tends to concentrate in the centre. A responsive and flexible development practice can only be achieved by the organisation which has responsive and flexible practitioners out there, in the (development) field, reading the development process of its clients/counterparts and facilitating responsive interventions. To achieve this, power must move to the periphery. There are various methods for effecting this; suffice to say here that the first four points mentioned above are prerequisites for this kind of managerial stance.

So what of the ubiquitous and infamous “development project”? For the rest of us, we are entirely constrained by donor practice; until it changes, we have little freedom to choose. So far as donors themselves are concerned, we have regarded them throughout these discussions—as we do in our practice generally—as being development practitioners, along with the rest of us, albeit practitioners who provide a very particular development intervention. For them—although not only for them—the need for financial controls remains paramount. It may be difficult to imagine control being exercised outside the boundary of the project, although moves towards “programmes”, or towards organisational rather than project funding, will help, and are not difficult to effect. More flexible methods, which will still satisfy the bookkeepers, can certainly be found if the organisational will is there. But the truth is more profound—and (perhaps) even less believable. If the five indications for an appropriate developmental management practice already



mentioned are taken seriously by donors as well, then the development project will gradually metamorphose of its own accord, to be replaced by a form which we cannot clearly imagine at present. Which, indeed, is a perfect manifestation of a central aspect of the development process itself—that we first have to let go of the old before we can hope to take on the new, let alone quite know what it will be.



## ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

“What is needed is a new frame of mind, a new inquisitive view of reality, a readiness to tread uncertain epistemological and methodical terrain, a willingness to discard disciplinary pillars and boundaries.”

—D.A. Kotze<sup>2</sup>

### Separating Wheat From Chaff

No one really seems to know where the phrase “capacity building” originated. Certainly its use has become ubiquitous in the development sector; it is upon you before you know it, and it seems to spring from all directions at once. “Capacity building” is used by Northern development organisations and donors when looking at their Southern “partners”; but the term is used also in the South itself, when non-governmental organisations (NGOs) try to address their own needs and constraints. (It is worth noting that it is only very recently being used by a limited number of Northern organisations about themselves.) What we may mean by capacity building might depend on whether we use the term as a Northern or as a Southern organisation; it might depend on whether we use the term with reference to others or to ourselves. And it will depend on how we see development organisations in terms of their value—in other words, capacity building for what?

From these considerations, two possible angles on capacity building immediately present themselves. The first angle takes its cue from the fact that Northern donors, and even Northern “operational” NGOs, often view their Southern “partners” as local delivery vehicles

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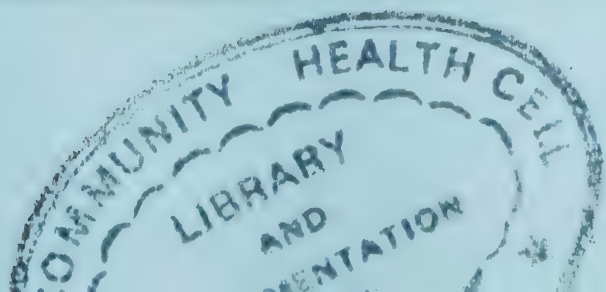
2. Quoted in *Focus Forum*, Vol. 6, No. 3, December 1998, published by Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa.



for plans and policies which are developed in the North. Within this perspective, the concept of capacity building is used by Northerners towards Southerners, with reference to others rather than to themselves, and within a context which sees Southern development organisations as local implementing agents for Northern policies. In this sense, capacity largely refers to the “absorption capacity” of Southern organisations; in other words, the donation of money by Northern donors is limited by the capacity of Southern organisations to effectively use that money, and be accountable for its use.

Thus capacity here refers to the ability of organisations to implement and manage projects, to exercise financial and product accountability as per Northern specifications, to employ and train staff competent to undertake specific tasks, and to report on their work in ways which are acceptable to their donors. In other words, capacity refers to the ability to deliver specified projects timeously and cost effectively. This may read as an extreme characterisation, and indeed there are many gradations, but the gist remains—capacity is the ability to deliver specified products, often according to others’ specifications.

The second angle starts from a contrary position—although it remains influenced and affected by the first. In this scenario, Southern development organisations (together with their more “alternative” or “progressive” Northern counterparts) view themselves as important and viable “organs of civil society”, players whose role is to work towards social transformation, towards redress, towards a better deal for the marginalised, towards poverty alleviation and towards parity with respect to the dynamics of power. As such, here we are really talking about building robust and sustainable organisations which are capable of sovereign focus and direction, of strategising and innovation, of responding with flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances, and of acting decisively to impact on, and change, their circumstances and social context.





This is a more recent appreciation of capacity, and is in line with current organisational thinking and literature about effective and sustainable organisations. In this version of capacity, Southern organisations are viewed as autonomous entities which engage actively and independently with both their own societies and with their Northern counterparts. According to this understanding both Southern and Northern development organisations, towards themselves and towards each other, are intent on building the capacity to organise themselves for different strategies, and for the long haul, rather than the capacity to perform a particular task at a specific time.

These two different scenarios have been raised here in order to clarify that we are concerned with the second, broader angle on capacity. Capacity then, in this sense, refers to the ability of an organisation to function as a resilient, strategic and autonomous entity. The emphasis is on the capacity to organise, rather than to carry out a particular task (particularly according to others' specifications), although clearly this latter ability forms an important subset of organisational capacity. This distinction creates a major break with the majority of capacity building interventions of the past—for example, the emphasis on training. We will return to this “break” below.

### **The Organisation With Capacity**

Over the years many different models or images of organisations have been generated, as more and more people have grappled with the tensions, potentials and anomalies of organisational life. We view the organisation as an open system comprising a number of different features; each of these features in themselves, as well as the dynamic and harmony of the relationships between them, is relevant and vital to organisational capacity.

The organisation is *open* in the sense that, while it has boundaries, these boundaries are porous, with the result that contextual influences



pervade and invade the system, ensuring continued growth and demanding adaptability. Each organisation is an entity in itself, but not entirely; it interacts with its environment, it affects and is affected by that environment. It is one entity among many, and its specific identity is a combination of its own internal integrity and its relationship with others. The continued growth, and the continued life of the organisation, depend largely on its interaction with its ever-changing context and environment. Without such interaction the organisation—as with a biological organism—would soon become dormant and cease to function.

The organisation is a *system* in that it is greater than the sum of its parts, and in fact the parts themselves are only identifiable in relation to each other. In other words, while there are various features of organisational life which may be separated out, nevertheless these component parts are continuously interacting and relating to each other. The parts affect, and are affected by, each other. It is out of the relationship between these parts that organisation, as such, arises.

To use a concept central to the new sciences, organisation *emerges* out of the interaction of its component parts as a form of greater complexity than any one of those parts. In attempting to understand the system, we must look to the whole, rather than *reduce* our understanding to the component parts. Our tendency, generated by a Newtonian or Cartesian view of the world, is towards analysis, towards gaining understanding through reduction of phenomena to their component parts; but this way of thinking has been found to be insufficient for considering complex systems.

Rather than reduction, instead of studying parts and hoping thereby to capture the whole, we need to generate a picture of the whole through exploring the relationships between the various parts, because it is through these relationships that the complexity of the whole emerges. Fritjof Capra writes, “The emphasis on the parts has been called mechanistic, reductionist, or atomistic; the emphasis on



the whole holistic, organismic, or ecological....In twentieth-century science the holistic perspective has become known as 'systemic' and the way of thinking it implies as 'systems thinking'."<sup>3</sup>

Before looking, then, at the component features of organisational life, we will first attempt to describe a picture of the capacitated organisation. We will then look at specific features, and especially the relationships between them, to understand how the whole (capacitated organisation) emerges from the parts.

In all the work which we ourselves have done with organisations, in all the research we have done, the same points keep arising as regards the organisation with capacity. That organisation is directed and focused; that is, it has a clear sense of its own identity in terms of its own strengths as well as in terms of its intended impact in its relationships with others and with its context. It focuses on its sources of inspiration. It is able to strategise and to prioritise, and it is able to adapt its strategies with flexibility and foresight. It does not complain about the many unfavourable external conditions which impact on it, but rather takes full responsibility for its own circumstances and believes that it can impact and affect those circumstances. It is self-critical and self-reflective, attributing any problems it may have to its own lack of strategic coherence, or management competence, or focused vision, or evaluative stance, rather than on outside factors beyond its own control. It concentrates on what it can do, rather than lamenting what it cannot do. It takes the time to learn from its successes and failures. It takes the time to understand itself, to evaluate honestly, to become aware of its strengths and weaknesses, to hone its methodology and sharpen its strategic edge, rather than spending all its time on constant activity in the field. It takes the time to develop its staff; not simply to ensure that they are trained, but to encourage them to develop inner resourcefulness, creativity and a self-critical appreciation of their organisation's practice—and it rewards such creativity and self-critique.

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3. Capra, F. (1996), *The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter*, Harper Collins, Great Britain.



It concentrates, then, on developing a kind of robust capability, rather than relying on the setting up of organisational structures and procedures, the securing of material resources, or the specific skills of staff. Of course these latter elements are of vital importance, and organisations which are badly structured or which are unstructured, which lack adequate and appropriate organisational procedures, which lack material resources and skilled staff, can hardly be said to be capacitated. Organisations which lack these latter elements will fail; but the point we are trying to make here stands. It is essential that an organisation is well-managed and well-resourced, but too many organisations regard these elements as sufficient, and as the departure point for capacity. On the contrary, all our work has shown that the departure point for capacity, given the volatile and ever-changing reality with which organisations interact and which they are trying to affect, lies in the ability to learn and focus, to adapt and respond, to move and change and develop, to harness creativity and innovation, to motivate and inspire its members, to achieve resilience and flexibility. It is a relentless quest for *quality* and *self-awareness* which enables organisations, rather than an emphasis on securing quantifiable indicators of organisational functioning.

This is a broad, idealised, over-generalised, picture of the capacitated organisation. In order to delve further, we turn now to the specific features of organisations which herald capacity—in other words we turn from the whole to the parts—after which we will return to the relationships between these parts in order to ascertain what such an analysis really means for an appreciation of capacity.

### **Features of Organisational Life**

Although, as noted earlier, all the elements in a system interweave and interact with each other, affect and are affected by each other, nonetheless it is possible to separate these elements out, for the purpose of understanding and analysis. Not only this, but although all



elements are important in their effect on the whole, we nevertheless believe that it is possible to describe a hierarchy of elements. (We briefly described this hierarchy earlier in the text; here we will elaborate upon this description.) Some elements are more complex and significant than others, and need to be in place before others, for capacity to be built; the others are put in place within the sphere of influence of those which come before them in the hierarchy. The following is an attempt to list the salient features of organisational life as a hierarchy of complexity.

### ***Context and Conceptual Framework***

The first requirement for an organisation with capacity, the “pre-requisite” on which all other capacity is built, is the development of a conceptual framework which reflects the organisation’s understanding of its world. This is a coherent frame of reference, a set of concepts which allows the organisation to make sense of the world around it, to locate itself within that world, and to make decisions in relation to it. This framework is not a particular ideology or theory, it is not necessarily correct, and it is not impervious to critique and change. It is not a precious, fragile thing, but a robust attempt to keep pace conceptually with the (organisational and contextual) developments and challenges facing the organisation. The organisation which does not have a competent working understanding of its world can be said to be incapacitated, regardless of how many other skills and competencies it may have.

Together with an understanding of its context—which also implies having sufficient information regarding that context—goes a particular organisational “attitude” towards that context. An organisation needs to build its confidence to act in and on the world in a way that it believes can be effective and have an impact. Put another way, it has to shift from “playing the victim” to exerting some control, to believing in its own capacity to affect its circumstances. Another aspect of “attitude” is accepting responsibility for the social and physical conditions “out there”, in spite of whatever the organisation



faces in the world. This implies a shift from a demand or blame-focused mentality to a more inclusive acceptance of the responsibilities which go with the recognition of human rights.

Whatever the history of oppression, marginalisation or simply nasty circumstances which an individual or organisation has had to suffer, these “attitudes” are the basis for effective action in the world. This is not a question of morality, of fairness or justice; it is simply the way things work.

### ***Vision***

With clarity of understanding and a sense of confidence and responsibility comes the possibility of developing organisational vision. Understanding and responsibility lead to a sense of purpose in which the organisation does not lurch from one problem to the next, but manages to plan and implement a programme of action, and is able to adapt the programme in a rational and considered manner.

Organisational vision is developed, really, through an interplay between internal and external constraints and possibilities. There is a reality out there which must be responded to, and there is an inner inspiration which must be harnessed and focused. No two organisations will choose to respond to the same external situation in the same way; every organisation must get in touch with its own driving force, must identify its own particular abilities and strengths, in order to be most effective. It must focus on the possibilities of its unique contribution. At the same time, every organisation will be in a unique relationship with its context, thus no two contexts will ever be quite the same. This interaction between understanding of particular context and appreciation of particular responsibility yields organisational vision.

### ***Strategy***

Organisational vision yields an understanding of *what* the organisation intends to do; strategy is a translation into *how* the organisation



intends to realise its vision. Strategy entails the development of particular methodologies of practice, coupled with the adaptation of those methodologies to particular circumstances. Strategic thinking gives effect to vision; it operationalises a general direction. It involves choosing, prioritising certain activities and approaches over others. It involves marshalling and coordinating scarce resources in the service of its chosen priorities. It involves differentiating between disparate activities, deciding which are primary and which are designed to support others. It involves the building of a coherent methodology of practice, and designing the organisation around that methodology.

The development and refinement of strategy is achieved through the constant interplay between doing, planning and evaluation. The organisation has to act, has to go beyond whatever is given, has to try new ways of giving effect to its vision, of impacting on its context. It has to monitor its actions, learn from its successes and failures, even learn what it means by success and failure—these things are not given at the outset. It has both to see what works and what does not work as well as to reflect in depth about what it means by its discernible impact, and what—perhaps unforeseen—consequences this impact releases. Given such evaluation, it has to rethink, replan, restrategise; improve and adapt its methodology as well as its understanding of its context, its vision, and its relationships with others.

### ***Culture***

We mentioned before the concept of organisational attitude. An important dimension of organisational attitude is that of organisational culture. By culture we understand the norms and values which are practised in an organisation; the way of life in the organisation; the way things are done in the organisation. Without changing the culture of an organisation, any other changes are likely to be short-lived and ineffectual. Many of the cultural aspects of organisations exist and operate unconsciously: what people *say* they value and believe in and what is *practised* in the organisation are often very different. Trying



to make the culture of an organisation conscious for itself is very important if that organisation is going to be in a position to make conscious choices about how it wishes to operate in the future.

Over time every organisation will develop particular ways of doing things—habits, norms, routines, mindsets. These things will begin to “go without saying”, they become natural grooves within which organisational thinking and practice begins to revolve. They become unconscious in the sense that the organisation loses awareness of them; and they begin to exert a tremendous power and force over the functioning of the organisation precisely because they are hidden and unobserved. They are the aspects of organisational functioning which are not spoken of but which therefore exert much more power than the more readily observable realities of structure and procedure, of resources and skills.

The organisation’s culture is a reservoir of incredible power and consequence. Unobserved, it holds the organisation checked, within its grasp. The organisation which makes it conscious however, which becomes aware of its own dynamics, and makes its values transparent and collective, is able to use that power as a source of liberation, creativity and energy.

### ***Structure***

Although these elements are not gained entirely sequentially, we may say that once organisational aims, strategy and culture are clear it becomes possible to structure the organisation in such a way that roles and functions are clearly defined and differentiated, lines of communication and accountability untangled, and decision-making procedures transparent and functional. Put slightly differently, “form follows function”—if one tries to do this the other way around the organisation becomes incapacitated.

This is a point which is almost invariably misunderstood. Too many attempts to intervene in organisational functioning take structure and



procedure as their starting point, partly because this element is easily observable, partly because it can be more directly accessed and manipulated, and partly because it *seems* to be the cause of so much malfunctioning. And often it is. But simple realignment of such structures and procedures is not the ready answer which it presents itself as, for if purpose, strategy and culture are impaired, then tampering with structure will not grant the organisation a reprieve with respect to its lack of capacity. More than this, in the capacitated organisation structures are put in place to *protect*, to support, to *enable* chosen vision, strategy and culture. They cannot replace them, but they can either protect or confuse them.

When structural thinking becomes paramount in an organisation, or in an organisational intervention, then the organisation becomes *bureaucratic* in a very particular sense. It becomes informed by a *structural* perspective—the need to accommodate the organisation to its own internal anomalies—rather than by a *strategic* perspective, which would be governed by a focused intention to impact on its context in an effective and purposeful fashion. The departure point then will not have been an attempt to understand and act on the needs and opportunities presented by its context, but will instead have been a reactive organisational stance intended to comply with internal organisational pressures as seamlessly as possible. The capacitated organisation understands what it is about, and structures itself accordingly; it does not begin by looking to its structure, but structures itself by looking to its purpose and strategy, and attempting to enable these to be managed.

### ***Skills***

The next step in the march towards organisational capacity, in terms of priority and sequence, is the growth and extension of individual skills, abilities and competencies—the traditional terrain of training courses. Of course skills feature earlier; they can, in and of themselves, generate confidence and a sense of control. Development cannot be viewed simplistically; these phases overlap. Yet what emerges clearly from



extensive experience is that there is a sequence, a hierarchy, an order. Unless organisational capacity has been developed sufficiently to harness training and the acquisition of new skills, training courses do not “take”, and skills do not adhere. The organisation which does not know where it is going and why; which has a poorly developed sense of responsibility for itself; and which is inadequately structured, cannot make use of training courses and skills acquisition.

### ***Material Resources***

Finally, an organisation needs material resources: finances, equipment, office space, and so on. Without an appropriate level of these, the organisation will always remain, in an important sense, incapacitated. However, the effects of resource deprivation can be countered through appropriate organisational “attitude”. That is, where resources are lacking, their judicious utilisation becomes capacitating, while simple lament becomes profoundly incapacitating. Once again it is worthwhile to note the common misunderstanding displayed by incapacitated organisations—the thought that they would become capacitated if only they had access to sufficient material resources. Yet experience has shown that, by and large, those organisations which complain about their lack of material resources, which attribute their failures to this organisational feature, lack the ability to counter these problems, while those organisations which accept their own incapacities and attempt to remedy them gain the ability to overcome or compensate for outer constraints.

This perspective on what constitutes a capacitated organisation yields some important insights. These go beyond simply having a list of indicators which we can use as a framework for understanding capacity. They go, indeed, beyond the parts to the whole. If we look at these elements of organisational life in terms of the meaning they have for the whole, if we begin to apprehend them through their relationships to one another, and if we allow the organisation as such to quite literally *emerge* from such an appreciation, then some quite new and perhaps radical insights arise concerning capacity and



capacity-building interventions. Because these insights are a necessary prerequisite for fully understanding the potential and practice of capacity building, we explore them below.

### **A Paradigm Shift: From Tangible to Intangible**

If you look toward the bottom of the hierarchy of features outlined above you will see those things which are quantifiable, measurable, elements of organisational life which can be easily grasped and worked with. Material and financial resources, skills, organisational structures and procedures—all these are easily assessed and quantifiable. In a word, they belong to the realm of material things; they belong to the realm of the visible. If however, we turn our attention to the top of the hierarchy, we enter immediately an entirely different realm, the realm of the invisible. Of course, organisations may have written statements of vision, of strategy and of value, but these written statements do not in any sense indicate whether an organisation has a working understanding of its world, they do not indicate the extent to which an organisation feels responsible for its circumstances or capable of having an effect on them. They do not indicate the extent to which an organisation is really striving to become a learning organisation, to what extent it is developing its staff or manifesting a team spirit or endeavour. They do not indicate the extent to which an organisation is reflective, non-defensive and self-critical. In short, the elements at the top of the hierarchy of elements of organisational life are ephemeral, transitory, not easily assessed or weighed. They are to a large extent invisible: invisible both to the organisation itself as well as to those managers and practitioners who would intervene to build organisational capacity.

Thus the most important elements in organisational life, those which largely determine the functioning of an organisation, are the elements which lie at the top of the hierarchy, not those which lie at the bottom. It is the less tangible, more invisible aspects of organisational



life which largely determine organisational functioning, yet it is on the more tangible, material aspects that most (incapacitated) organisations focus. Redesigning structures, building skills or securing resources are secondary to conceptual clarity, focused vision, coherent strategy and enabling culture.

Organisational thinking which begins with structure, skills or resources will leave the organisation confused and incapacitated. The way to process organisational transitions is to gain clarity with respect to understanding and purpose, develop resultant strategy, and become aware of debilitating cultural patterns. Only then, and in response to these things, can questions of structure and skills and resources be adequately addressed. The organisation which begins at the bottom of the hierarchy will always remain reactive; for an organisation to become proactive—to have capacity—it must think things through from the top.

We are saying, then, that the most important elements in organisational life, those which largely determine the functioning of the organisation, are of a nature which make them more or less impervious to conventional approaches to capacity building. Consider this from two angles.

First, from the point of view of the organisation itself. If you interview organisations which suffer from a lack of capacity, you will find that they complain readily about lack of resources, lack of skills, inappropriate structures, an unfavourable history or an impossible context. In other words, they place the blame for their circumstances “out there”, on others or on a situation which is beyond their control, and specifically on those visible elements which lie at the bottom of the hierarchy. But interview organisations which have developed a certain strength, robustness or resilience, and you will discover that they generally take responsibility for their lack of capacity, that they attribute it to their own struggles with organisational culture and values, with lack of vision, lack of leadership and



management, and so on. Put another way, they manifest self-understanding. Capacitated organisations will manifest both stronger invisible elements as well as an ability to reflect on these elements—which is itself a feature of these stronger invisible elements situated at the top of the hierarchy.

Second, from the point of view of the capacity builder. If we examine honestly the kinds of interventions we perform, either as development practitioners or as donors, we have to recognise that most of these concentrate on the lower end of the hierarchy. Mainly, our efforts consist in providing resources or training courses. These are sometimes accompanied by, or preceded by, “needs assessments”, or even “audits”, which themselves concentrate on the visible, more tangible, elements which have little impact where the top elements of the hierarchy are undeveloped. We advise organisations to make changes which we think will be good for them, which in itself can diminish the robustness of those elements at the top, rather than strengthen them through a form of facilitation which enables organisations to come to grips with their own issues, thus developing those top elements. Finally, and more recently, we have begun to help organisations with “strategic planning”. This in itself would be a step in the right direction were we to include the conceptual construction of the organisation’s world, as well as forays into organisational culture, in the process. Unfortunately many strategic planning exercises consist of piecemeal attempts (that is, unrelated to other elements) which comprise the setting of goals and objectives, the “material aspects” of planning, and which leave the organisation pretty much as incapacitated as before, with a “plan of action” but without the ability to innovate, reflect on and adapt the plan as circumstances and time progress—the abilities that really constitute capacity. Why then do we not shift the focus of our interventions?

The answer is as obvious as the dilemma itself. Because we do not see—have not been trained or conditioned to see—things in this way. Because it presents a radical challenge to our customary ways



of seeing the world. Because our conventional packages and products, our short-term ad hoc responses and interventions are what we have, are what we use, and we will resist the move away from them for as long as possible. Because we take comfort in what we can provide rather than in what may be really necessary. Because these kinds of interventions are sanctioned by donors. Because organisations have learned to ask for them. Because they are tangible and quantifiable. Because they can be delivered. Because their delivery and assessment can be easily managed and monitored. Because “development” practitioners can be (relatively easily) trained to deliver them. Because they are hard-edged, unambiguous and certain. Because they do not embroil us in the hazy shifting sands, in the uncertain worlds of fog and mirages which characterise the reality of organisational change processes. Because they do not challenge our certainties with the hazardous obstacles of organisational contradiction. Because they do not fundamentally challenge us.

Organisations, and organisational change processes, are contradictory, ambiguous and obtuse. They are long-term and not easily observed. Rising to the challenge means learning to observe differently, and to see different things. While we have described the elements at the top of the hierarchy as invisible, this does not mean that we cannot comprehend them. We can learn to see them, to *apprehend* them, and part of the work of capacity building lies in enabling the organisation itself to apprehend them. But this requires a new way of seeing.

### **Shifting the Paradigm**

To see differently, we have to think differently. We have learned to think according to Newtonian or Cartesian principles—this particular scientific stream has formed the bedrock of most educational systems adopted by the west, which has in turn influenced most others. One of the characteristics of this view of the world, as noted earlier,



is the emphasis on quantification and analysis, on reductionism, on the belief that one must study the separated and dissected parts to discover the whole. This has generated a “thing” view of the world, and a belief in scientific objectivity. This is a mechanistic world view where “things” act on other “things” and thus effect those “things” in ways which are theoretically determinable and predictable. The world as a gigantic clock, where one thing strikes another and causes a third event, and the process is reducible to a set of simple laws which—once again theoretically—can be described, predicted and controlled. Thus the world is presented as a passive mechanism which can be programmed. This is the view which has largely prescribed our perception of organisations, and our attempts at building organisational capacity.

But the new sciences—quantum mechanics, quantum physics, microbiology—describe many aspects of the world differently. “Things” have disappeared; as scientists delved deeper and deeper in their search for basic building blocks they discovered that such blocks, such things, finite and discreet, do not in fact exist. Instead they found that “things” change their form and properties in relation to each other, as they respond to each other (and to the scientist observing them). This is difficult to grasp, but has irrevocably been demonstrated—the nature of “substance” is not easily definable, is not one thing; each “particle” of the world can hold many different, even contradictory properties, depending on their relationship with other “things”. Thus the world is now seen to consist of “relationships” rather than “things”. And what we think of as things are actually intermediate states in a constantly changing network of interactions and relationships.

Systems, then, are not reducible and predictable; everything depends on the particular and unique relationships which configure and disappear in an ebb and flow. We have, then, to substitute our notion of predictability for another concept of potential—everything is different and new depending on different interactions, relationships and settings.



This gives us our first intimation of a new way of seeing. Instead of looking for discrete things, instead of reducing a complex whole to dissected parts, we need to begin to develop the ability to look at relationships, at the interactions between component parts. It is in the spaces between things that the world arises; it is in the spaces between organisational elements that organisation itself emerges; it is in the relationships between people that organisational realities emerge. We need to begin to look, not at things, but at the spaces between things, at relationships and interactions. We need to begin to apprehend the order which moves the whole, beyond the parts. We cannot map all the variables of a system and then think we can control the system; we must see beyond the fragments, to the order being expressed by the whole. Which means we have to step back and allow flow, process, motion, the gestalt of the whole, to impress itself upon us. We have to learn to *appreciate*, and to appreciate pattern, rather than simply analyse. It is the *configuration* of the various elements which we need to observe—the system is discerned through the pattern which is expressed. It is found in the form which reveals the order of the whole, rather than in the discrete pieces.

When we begin to appreciate relationships, the spaces between the parts, then another angle provided by the new sciences becomes available to us. In Newtonian science, space was regarded as empty, as a void; material reality consisted of discrete things which acted upon each other across the nothingness of space. But in quantum mechanics it has been proved that “instantaneous-action-at-a-distance” occurs; in other words, “non-local” causality is real. (The so-called “butterfly effect” refers—that a butterfly fluttering its wings on one side of the planet can be the final event needed to precipitate a hurricane on the other side of the planet. The El Niño climatic phenomenon is a topical case in point.) There are connections between things which escape us when we think of the spaces between things as empty. But what if space is not a void? Scientists now believe that space is filled with “fields”, invisible “mediums of connections”, invisible structures, invisible relational webs which



influence material things and which provide matter with form. Fields may in fact be more “real” than matter; it is now thought that discrete particles come into existence, often only temporarily, when fields intersect. These invisible fields, then, are the underlying foundations of reality. They structure space, and it is through this structuring, through such formative forces, that observable reality is made manifest. Material reality is not the only form of reality.

As an illustration, and to lead us further, there is a particular type of field called a morphogenic field, which is built up through the accumulated behaviours of species members, and shapes the future behaviour of that species. After some members of a species have learned a behaviour, others will find it easier to learn that skill. The *form* resides in the (morphogenic) field, and it *patterns* behaviour without the need for labourious learning of the skill.<sup>4</sup>

The point of this brief and seemingly tangential foray into the new sciences is not to learn specific “things” which may aid our understanding of organisations, but rather to appreciate that a revolution is required in the very form of our thinking in order that we are able to apprehend the invisible realities which form and pattern organisational life and functioning. We can take the elements at the top of the hierarchy of organisational features as metaphoric or actual “fields”; the fact is that we need to learn to see differently. We need to learn to see through the parts to the whole. We need to learn to intuit the relationships between the parts, for it is out of these relationships that organisation emerges. We need to learn to apprehend the invisible fields which are the formative and fundamental forces behind organisational capacity. We need to learn to appreciate pattern and form, flow and process. We need to stand back, gain a whole picture, see the order which informs the whole, beyond an analysis of parts. And we need to learn to work with these patterns, help organisations to become aware of their own functioning in this

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4. Wheatley, M. (1992). *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organisation From an Orderly Universe*, Berret-Koehler, San Francisco.



respect, and in so doing help them to play a more active role in forming and patterning their whole existence.

The point is that—with respect to organisational capacity—contextual grasp, focused vision, coherent strategy and enabling culture act as powerful invisible fields which form the organisation and its functioning. The relationships between these, and the condition of each one in itself, are the formative forces through which capacity emerges. Piecemeal and *ad hoc* interventions in response to a fixation on particular parts or on the (visible, material) elements at the bottom of the hierarchy, may be what we generally provide, but they do not form the basis of an adequate capacity-building methodology. The discipline of organisation development demands a new type of appreciation, a new way of seeing. A living, vibrant and holistic picture of the organisation must be elicited, and the organisation enabled to appreciate itself as a living, vibrant and holistic organism. We need to stand back, apprehend the significant organisational formative patterns, and facilitate the organisation's awareness and comprehension of itself, so that it (re)gains authority over its own destiny. As capacity builders, this is our first challenge.

### **Consolidating the Paradigm Shift: From Simplicity to Complexity**

The need to look at relationships between elements of the system, to apprehend the invisible patterns which govern organisational life, leads to the understanding that we need to stand back and get a feel of the whole if we hope to effectively intervene into the organisation or into any of its component parts. This brings us to a further appreciation of the complexity of organisations and of organisational interventions, or capacity building.

While it may be true that organisations can be seen as systems of interlocking elements which are arranged in a hierarchy of complexity



from those which are less tangible to those which are more, this perspective is not always appropriate. It is not always the case that capacity-building interventions into organisations should always begin with the intangible before they move onto the more visible, or with the whole before a particular part. The reality is far more complex than any one theory or model can contain. It all depends on where a particular organisation is at a particular time, and on what kind of organisation it is.

A small, new development organisation has a different level of impact and “sophistication” from a large organisation which is established and effective. The larger organisation has more need of “sophisticated organisational conditions” because development and growth in capacity implies greater sophistication of organisational processes, functions and structures. While the new organisation will need clarity of vision, it may not yet have the problems which often accompany organisational vision building activities within the older organisation. (To put this slightly differently, the vision “field” of the new organisation may still be forming, while that of the older will already be determining large aspects of organisational life.) The needs of individual staff members in terms of skills—and therefore training courses—will differ at different stages of the organisation’s life, as will material resource constraints and assets. Similarly, with respect to structure, organisations will have different needs at different stages of their lives. At times, an increasingly complex structure will be called for; at other times “destructuring” will be required.

One NGO may be struggling with the transition in “attitude” from resistance to responsibility, in the wake of a political transition, while another NGO, comfortable, well-resourced and operating in a context of political stability, may be dealing with attitudinal issues which it refers to as organisational culture, issues of meaning, principle and motivation. An NGO in its early phases may function healthily with a flat, informal structure and later, in order to maintain the same level of health a more hierarchical structure may be



called for. A membership organisation may have achieved greater organisational clarity through clarifying its constitutional or membership structures, only to discover that it degenerates into chaos and conflict when it begins to employ staff without clarifying the relationship between its operational structure (staff) and its constitutional structure.

The point is that although there is a basic order in which competency in the elements is attained, and in which organisational capacity building occurs, needs change with respect to all these elements as the organisation develops. Even more importantly, although intervention or work done on any one of these elements will not prove effective unless sufficient work has been done on the preceding elements in the hierarchy—for example, training will not “take” when organisational vision, culture and structure is unresolved, and it does not help to secure resources when the organisation is not equipped to carry out its tasks—even so, these elements are interdependent and one may have to work on a number of levels simultaneously in certain situations if one is to be effective.

Even more importantly—and perhaps paradoxically—while the concept of a hierarchy provides us with a guide, there are many times when one has to work on lower elements in the hierarchy in order to have an effect on higher elements. For example, there are times when the acquisition of an appropriate structure will have a beneficial effect on organisational culture where work on that culture itself has proved ineffective. Such organisational examples abound throughout the hierarchy.

And then, of course, we have been describing the organisation as an almost abstract system without taking account of the most salient point—the fact that it is composed of people. When dealing with an organisation we are dealing with far more than a single system; we are dealing with individual people as systems in themselves, and we



are dealing with their relationships. People, with their depths and trivialities, with their potentials and eccentricities, with their inspirations and their struggles, with their strengths and shadows, build the elements out of which organisation arises; these elements take on the character of the strongest and weakest aspects of the people who build them. At the same time, the behaviours and attitudes of organisational members are moulded and shaped by the organisation itself, by their particular relationship to the organisation and through their relationships to one another.

For example, conflict may arise through disagreements concerning contextual understanding, organisational vision or strategic focus; it may be encouraged by an organisational culture which has (unconsciously) come to accept constant bickering and in-fighting as endemic; it may arise through procedural inconsistencies. Equally, however, it may arise through genuine individual dislike, the inability of certain people to appreciate each other's contributions; and these individual struggles may then influence vision, strategy, culture and procedure. The same can be said of effective teamwork, as opposed to conflict. And it is not always clear that conflict is unhelpful. It may be the very thing needed to shake an organisation out of a dangerous state of comfort and lethargy, and help to re-establish its cutting edge.

Organisations have to steer narrow passages between organisational and individual need, between encouraging creativity and ensuring accountability, between stimulating unique contributions and insisting on regulatory procedures applicable to everyone equally. Organisations demand effective leaders; equally they demand effective followers. An organisation will both thrive on, and suffer through, diversity; sameness may make things easier in the short term and less sustainable in the long term. People, and their relationships, spread themselves throughout all the elements of the organisation; without them there would be no organisation. An organisation is a participative enterprise, or it is nothing.



Organisations, then, have to work with people, and people introduce vast areas of complexity into organisational life. Interventions towards organisational capacity have to recognise that the building of individual capacity, and capacitated relationships, is a requisite for the building of organisational capacity, and in fact determines that capacity in the same way as do the elements of organisational life. Capacity building has to respect the complexities generated by the interplay between individual and organisation, and work as much with individuals and with small groupings as with the larger system.



## SUMMING UP

What all of the foregoing means, in essence, is that although one may have an explanatory and sensible model of what constitutes organisational health, competence and capacity, there are three aspects of organisational reality which confound simplistic attempts to impose this model on specific organisational situations. The first is that, while every organisation may share similar features, nevertheless each organisation is unique, both in itself and in terms of its stage of development, and this uniqueness demands unique, singular and specifically different responses. Second, while the model may adequately describe the elements of organisational capacity and even the order of their acquisition, it cannot predict or determine organisational change processes, which are complex, ambiguous and often contradictory. And organisational change, rather than a static model describing organisational elements, is the essence of the capacity-building game. Third, the interplay between individual and organisational capacity introduces a further element of complexity which attests to the unique eccentricity of every organisation.

In other words, being equipped with a perspective on how organisations function, while it is a prerequisite for effective capacity building, is no substitute for direct observation of the particular organisational realities into which capacity-building strategies and initiatives intervene. One needs the intelligence, acuity, mobility and penetrating perception to be able to “read” the particular nature of a specific situation if one hopes to be effective in organisational capacity building. It is all too easy to presume, to make judgments, to impose one’s understanding, to compare one organisational situation with another. It is all too easy to base one’s interventions on a theoretical model rather than on an accurate assessment of the situation at hand. It is all too easy to design general capacity-building interventions in the office rather than specific and individual interventions based on observations in the field. It is all too easy to design general capacity-building interventions for



mass delivery rather than individually specific and nuanced interventions. General “capacity-building” interventions—programmes, courses, mass-based delivery vehicles—are easy to manage, easy to quantify, to raise funds for, to fund, to control. But they are all inadequate. Genuine, and effective, capacity building is something other.

There are too few development organisations, too few development practitioners, too few donors, who take the time to read specific situations in order to design appropriate and necessarily transitory—necessarily because the organisation being worked on will develop beyond a particular intervention as a result of the effectiveness of that intervention—interventions based on an intelligent reading. The radical nature of the paradigm shift we are suggesting here is that development practitioners are normally trained to deliver interventions—or packages or programmes—rather than to read the developmental phase at which a particular organisation may be and then to devise a response which may be appropriate to that organisation at that particular time and to nothing else.

The ability to read an organisational situation requires a background theory with respect to capacity—which we have begun to outline above—but it also requires an understanding of development, the ability to observe closely without judgement, sensitivity, empathy, an ability to penetrate to the essence of a situation, to separate tangents from essence, the ability to create an atmosphere of trust out of which an organisation may yield up the secrets which it will normally hold back (even from itself) in defensive reaction, the ability to really hear and listen and see, the ability to resist the short sharp expert response which is usually more gratifying to the practitioner than to the organisation; and then, out of an accurate reading, to bring (or arrange for) the appropriate response.

This is a paradigm shift, a radically different approach, a far cry from the normal delivery mechanisms of development practitioners, organisations and donors. It is in reaction to this complexity



that we all too often build simplistic notions of organisational capacity, and engage in simplistic delivery of piecemeal capacity building interventions—training, training the trainers, limited strategic planning (often dominated by particular planning packages), structural adjustments, expert advice, input of material resources. All of these interventions have their place, but not in and of themselves. Where they are appropriate, it will be as part of a wider organisation development process. And it is this process which should be our primary concern.

Shifting to a process perspective, to a focus on the whole rather than the parts, to a recognition of the relationships between the parts, to an appreciation of the seminal role of the invisible elements at the top of the organisational hierarchy of complexity, to an apprehension of the fields which structure and form organisations, requires a new way of thinking and seeing. Understanding the governing factors of organisational capacity, and learning to perceive them, is one component of capacity building. Another is an appreciation of how organisations develop over time. An understanding of organisational capacity, an understanding of the development process through which organisations move, and an ability to work with ambiguity and contradiction, are necessary in order to engage in effective capacity building.

In short, the simplistic, largely technical approaches of most Northern organisations and donors are irrelevant, misguided and wasteful. We may wish for easy solutions, but there are no short cuts. Yet neither need we lament the absence of understanding and proven practice around capacity building. Those who are serious about capacity building, who are intellectually honest and who approach their practice with a certain rigour and discipline, will recognise that effective capacity-building approaches conform with what is observable—if we are prepared to look—and even with “common sense”. The fact that they are demanding, challenging and strategically complex does not provide anyone with the excuse



to opt for ways which clearly have little effect. It does mean, though, that we have to pay more respect to the complexity of development work than we have hitherto.







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NGLS's information outreach and communications programme is supported by FAO, IFAD, ILO, UNCHS (Habitat), UNCTAD, DESA, DPI, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNDCP, UNESCO, UNEP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIDO, World Bank, WFP, WHO, the UN Foundation and the governments of Canada, Denmark, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.











